

November 5, 2023

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost / Proper 26

**Meditation:** "Lest We Forget"

When I was reading the Psalm for today, I had in mind that this was the Sunday prior to Remembrance Day, and my imagination was fired. Imagine if the writer of the Psalm had Remembrance Day in mind as he was sitting writing it. It might have sounded more like this:

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;  
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.  
I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings from of old,  
things that we have heard and known,  
that our ancestors have told us.  
We will not hide them from our children;  
we will tell them to generations to come  
the horrific acts of global warfare.  
We must teach our children;  
that the next generation might know them,  
the children yet unborn,  
and rise up and tell them to their children,  
so that they should not also engage in global conflict,  
and not forget the horrors of war.

Some might accuse Isaiah of having a vivid and active imagination. He lived in a time of perpetual war in the nations around Israel and the constant threat of attack. Indeed, in Isaiah's time the Kingdom of Judah was attacked by the Assyrians and the people scattered to the four winds. These are the lost tribes of Israel. Isaiah envisioned a future when humankind would come to their senses and things would be different, radically different, almost unimaginably different. It would be a time when the wolf and the lamb shall eat together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox; a time when people shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; a future where nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; a future where they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees and no one shall make them afraid anymore.

Imagination is precisely what is required of us today, for we cannot remember what we have not experienced. We can only imagine the drone of the engines of hundreds of aircraft in the sky above our heads. We can only imagine the shaking of the earth under the power of blanket bombing. We can only imagine the ear-shattering thunder of flak. We can only imagine the searing heat of a bullet penetrating our flesh, or of mustard gas filled lungs. We can only imagine the blinding flashes of shell fire. We can only imagine the sour-sweetness of our own blood as it trickles across our lips, or the metallic smell of the blood of many spilled across the landscape. We can only imagine the suffocating stench of smoke and rotting corpses.

Today is a day when we gather to remember and honour the soldiers who have fought our wars, and who have paid the ultimate price, their lives. Yet we risk glorifying war and violence when we do remember them. We risk slipping into the belief that our differences can be resolved only through force. We risk slipping into the belief that we are different. It doesn't really matter whether the dead are soldiers from England, or Ireland, or Scotland, or Canada. It doesn't matter if the soldiers are from France, or Italy, or Germany, or Russia, or Ukraine. It doesn't matter if the soldiers are from Afghanistan, or Iraq, or Syria, or South Africa, or Israel, or Gaza. When they have died fighting at the behest of their leaders, they are equally dead.

It is not enough to remember only the soldiers who died because of a lack of imagination on the part of governments. It is not enough to remember only those, soldier and civilian, who died because governments failed. We need to remember that armed conflict is a sin. There were no conditions on "Thou shalt not kill." God did not write, "Thou shalt not kill, except on Mondays and alternate Thursdays, and only then if they are Muslim and not Christian." God created all life and saw that it was good. All life is sacred, in God's eyes. In fact, if we saw each other through God's eyes, never again would we see one another as fundamentally different, never again would we hold allegiance to a nation or a flag. Instead, we would hold allegiance only to the realm of God.

The men and women who experienced those things during the two world wars are almost all gone now, and we who live today can only imagine. We need to remember that they too had imaginations. They imagined a world in which there was justice and peace for all. They imagined a world in which weapons would be unnecessary. They imagined a world in which we would move beyond force as a way of resolving our differences. Perhaps they even imagined a day when automatic guns would be welded together to form statues, as they are in parts of Africa; or a world in which swords would become plough shares, spears would become pruning hooks, and atomic warheads would be transformed into electricity and medical isotopes; a world in which nation would not rise against nation or learn war anymore. They imagined a world not unlike the world Isaiah imagined.

We say, 'Lest we forget.' And so, we remember the names of those who served the flag, or the king, but I say to you, it is not only the people we should not forget, it is the horrors of war and the suffering it inflicts on all of humanity that we should not forget. It is the words, 'Thou shalt not kill' that we should not forget. It is the wild imaginings of Isaiah of a new earth where all live with justice and in peace that we should not forget. May it be so. Amen.